

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

The Boston Globe

Boston-area galleries show innocence and experience

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April 04, 2012

A family with two small children passed by Steven Zevitas Gallery the other day, opened the door to come in, and then thought better of it. You can see the allure for children in Peter Op-heim's large-scale paintings of sweet but monstrous figures he has built out of clay. Some have flowers for eyes; many smile; one holds a bunny and a duck. They could star in a claymation show aimed at preschoolers.

But there's something very adult about Op-heim's paintings — and not just the one in which the figures might be having sex. They are gorgeously painted, with loose, sometimes aggressive brushstrokes that agitate these very solid bodies. The sheer scale of many of them intimidates. What would be cute at 6 inches tall becomes monstrous at human size. It's hard for the mind to square adorable with confrontational; Opheim asks us to do that, and sets us off our pins.

Naturally, there's an element of letting your freak flag fly underlying these works. Opheim also explores relationships, in a piece such as "Untitled (153)," which features one big white figure with bulging brown eyes and a carrot-type nose, and two smaller figures, perhaps the progeny of the big one. They gaze up as he — he seems like a dad, to me — extends his tiny stubs of blue arms outward, welcoming or pontificating.

My favorite is "Untitled (147)," the sex one, not because it's in the least erotic, but because it's so very strange. There are two figures. One stands behind the other, turned toward us, wearing a fat smile. The other, leaning forward, has two heads — one on its shoulders and the other hanging below them, upside down and grinning. It's a smart composition; those three heads almost make the canvas spin.

The question of whether these toylike figures are having sex or are engaged in something else, maybe in innocent play, gives the painting an extra charge. In all these works, Op-heim navigates the unruly thicket of themes blending childhood with adulthood — concepts that we ordinarily prefer to keep separate — to charming and unsettling effects.

Beneath the glitz

Painter Laurel Sparks's awkward, splashy paintings at Howard Yezerski Gallery are a jaunty exploration of gaudiness and dress-up, and the emptiness that lies beneath all the glitz and baubles.

For years, Sparks has built her abstract paintings around a rough rendering of a Venetian chandelier. That shape — droopy, drippy, ornate, unpredictable — still stands at the center of her canvases, and much of the time, it's unpainted. The wild patterns and splatters that surround it, and now and then cover it like a curtain, delineate that naked form.

Oh, the carnival around that central blankness! "Whore of Babylon" includes a cocoa-colored patch studded with rhinestones, gyrating globules of white stippled with marble dust, and a dizzying pattern of narrow, glowing blue-red windows, like those in a cathedral, against black.

"Medusa" has even more drama, with undulant ribbons of color, some studded with fat costume jewels, cascading over the central unpainted canvas like Medusa's viperous locks. Sparks has gotten more

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adventurous with her materials and her use of paint. All the bells and whistles in a single work stupefy. "Liquid Sky" has a blue section that looks covered in giant spitballs on one side, and a luminous diamond patchwork on the other. Every painting balances "Ick!" against "Wow!"

That unpainted section adds a compositional edge. It waffles satisfyingly between figure and ground, and it's a plain, almost ugly foil for the rhinestones, glitter, and wild painterly patterns. It also inevitably raises a question: What's going on beneath the drag queen's drag?

Bold designs

Many of Nan Hass Feldman's post-impressionist-style landscapes and cityscapes at Fountain Street Fine Art pop with bold designs and contours. At her best, the artist sees the world unfurling before her in a quirky, cartoon geometry, quivering and mirage-like. Foreground and background hold equal weight. Feldman uses color, lines drawn into the paint, and patterns to activate her canvases, and keep the viewer's eye roaming.

"Fishing on the Blue Li River" shows fishermen in low boats, zigzagging over the rippled water. The artist cleverly outlines reflections in the water's shimmer. These lines Feldman traces into the paint give her works a jazzy rhythm. She also takes risks with hues; the cypresses in the foreground of "The Burgundy Hills of Puygiron" are salmon and pink, as well as green. Hills beyond them resemble so many quilts mussed on an unmade bed. The burgundy and green slopes beyond ripple like ocean waves.

Feldman packs her paintings so that they burst with bright tones and jiggly lines and one pattern laid over the next. Likewise, she has filled the gallery with canvases, as if she wants to shower the viewer with color and movement. Unfortunately, the paintings aren't consistently good. Quieter paintings lack the wily caffeinated energy of this artist's better work. She should have used half the space for a more concentrated show.